**Primary Language Matters: Is there a link Between Bilingual Education and English Language Learners' Academic Achievement?**

Nury Rodriguez

An Action Research Project

Education 702.22: Seminar in Applied Theory and Research I

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**Abstract**

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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**Introduction**

The issue of whether students who are learning English as a second language should be taught using their primary language or in an English only classroom has been widely debated by many stakeholders in the field of education. It is an important issue because it concerns the fundamental right of providing the best education by ways of programs to help second language learners succeed academically. Although federal law mandates schools to provide students instructional support by using the primary language to help English learners transition from their native language to the second language acquisition. Current thinking and practices concerning bilingual education programs in schools are changing. For example, the state of California has adopted proposition 227 (P-227). This proposition restricts the use of bilingual education to educate English language learners (Mora, 2000). Consequently, P-227 will probably have a domino effect, for other states will restrict primary language support in schools. As researches Wiley and Wright (2004) point out, this new thinking concerning the ineffectiveness of bilingual education is without merit, for “less than 30% of California’s 1.4 million language-minority students received any bilingual education prior to passage of Proposition 227” (p. 151).

While there is a lack of consensus about what educational model works best to teach English language learners (ELLs), research shows that the ELLs’ population in some schools are experiencing low levels of reading and math scores on standardized tests. “On the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), fourth—grade ELLs scored 36 points below non-ELLs in reading and 25 points below non-ELLs in math” (as cited in Goldberg, 2008, p. 11). The change in current policy concerning bilingual education, and the many different arguments that have been put forward about the effectiveness of different educational models to teach English language learners makes selecting the right program to instruct second language learners one of the greatest challenges that educators face today.

Research shows that there are conflicting points of views on how to teach English language learners. Baker (1998), emphasizes that the most effective method to teach limited-English-proficient students (LEP) is with a structured English immersion (SEI) program. He asserts that the goal of the school is to provide students with an effective program for them to acquire English language proficiency, and that the goal of schools is not for students to acquire primary language proficiency. Ovando and Collier’s (1985) research on multicultural theory states that it is essential for schools to embrace children’s language (as cited in Banks, page 32). Furthermore, Verdugo and Flores (2007) state that the use of students’ language and culture promotes academic achievement. In fact, Cummins (1979) claims that the primary language is needed to acquire proficiency in the target language. Moreover, Cummins’ (1979) developmental interdependence hypothesis asserts that the “development of competence in a second language is partially a function of the type of competence already developed in the first language at the time when intensive exposure to the second language begins” (as cited in Lenters, 2004, p. 329). The developmental interdependence hypothesis needs to be examined in order to determine if the level of competence in the first language predicts the level of proficiency attainment in the second language. Since many schools are not providing developmental bilingual education programs to LEP students, longitudinal research is needed to examine the effects of a transitional bilingual program on students with low and high native language proficiency. However, there are limitations for short term and longitudinal studies in this area of study, for the reason that transitional bilingual programs provide short-term support to students, and then they are mainstreamed to English-language monolingual programs, English-monolingual-plus-ESL programs, or structured immersion programs, so there is a discontinuity of program instruction for these children.

**Statement of the Problem**

The purpose of this study at PSX, a low income, urban elementary school in Brooklyn, is to describe the effects of how students’ low and high Spanish primary language proficiency influences students’ level of reading achievement in English, using a transitional bilingual education program.

**Review of Related Literature**

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of bilingual education one must be aware of the history, issues, and current theories related to the field of bilingual education in the United States. Since 1974, the Lau v. Nichols Supreme Court ruling mandates schools in the United States to offer language minority students (LMS) primary language support, for doing otherwise constitutes a violation of their Civil Rights (Mora, 2000). It is a not easy for schools to comply with this law.

Miller and Endo (2004) state the following:

At least 3.5 million children identified as limited in English proficient (LEP) are enrolled in U.S. schools. Yet many schools have no programs for LEP Students, and many others have only minimal English as a second language (ESL) or bilingual classes. (p. 786)

In addition, Goldenberg's (2008) research found that it is difficult for educators to provide support to ELLs for this population is constantly increasing, and this population is from different language backgrounds (Goldenberg, 2008). Capps, Fix, Murray, Passel, and Herwantoro (2005); Larsen, (2004); U.S. Census Bureau (2003) report that “by far, the majority of ELLs—80 percent—are Spanish speakers. This is an important fact to bear in mind, since Spanish speakers in the U.S. tend to come from lower economic and educational backgrounds” (as cited in Goldenberg, 2008, p. 10). It is a challenge to educate these LEP students, Cummins (1979) states that “the developmental competence in a second language partially a function of the type of competence already developed in the first language,” and this student population is at different levels of primary language competence (as cited in Lenters, 2004, p. 329).

Besides the socio-economic and linguistic factors affecting second language learners, there are other factors affecting ELLs such as: assessment, school personnel’s education, and other factors. These factors contribute not only to the academic underachievement of these children, but also these factors contribute to success or failure of a bilingual education program. As researcher Duran (2008) has explained, “it is important to understand how important historical, cultural, and linguistic background differences have to be taken into account in interpreting the results of assessment and the design of new assessment strategies aligned to the characteristics of students” (p. 295). He argued that large-scale assessment performed on these children does not measure what these children really know. English language learners have different levels of education and different levels of proficiency in their primary language, and assessment accommodation are not efficient in testing these children’s skills and knowledge (Duran, 2008).

Moreover, the lack of school based personnel knowledge of the different programs available to ELLs, does not offer informational support to the parents of these students, in that they might prevent families from making the correct decision when selecting the right program for their children. Consequently, the lack of school personnel knowledge about available programs, language, culture, and other factors make parents become less involved in their children’s education. However, parents must be aware of the role the school will play and the role they must play to help their children succeed in school (Ochoa & Rhodes, 2005). A 2000 research by Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellent (CREDE), showed that ELLs who participated in English-only mainstream programs have the largest dropout rates. Therefore, there is a lack of understanding from school personnel as well as a from parents about the different bilingual education programs available at different schools, so parents cannot make and educated decision about which program will work best for their children (Ochoa & Rhodes, 2005).

With out a doubt, there are many factors affecting the English language learners’ population, and there is lack of agreements between policy, research, and practice. Krashen (1999), states that bilingual education has been the source of considerable political and educational debates (as cited in Honigsfeld, 2009). Laosa’s (2000) research found that there are different program models to instruct students with LEP status such as the English-language monolingual, English-monolingual-plus-ESL, transitional bilingual education, maintenance bilingual education, and the structured immersion program. The opponents of bilingual education state that the structured immersion program uses more English as the language of instruction than compared to the bilingual education programs (Baker, 1998). The goal of a bilingual education is to help second language learners achieve high levels of English proficiency, and, consequently, achieve high level of achievement in all other academic subjects (Rossell & Baker, 1996). The structured immersion program has a greater percentage of instructional time dedicated to practice the target language. On the other hand, bilingual education programs use too much of the primary language for instruction (Baker, 1998). In the same way, Reese, Goldenberg, and Saunders (2006) conducted a study of programs using primary language, and English immersion for instruction. This study concluded that there is a correlation between the language of instruction and the scores on standardized test. For example, if the primary language was used for instruction, these children scored higher in standardized test in the primary language, and lower in English. Likewise, if the target language for instruction, these children scored higher on standardized test in English, and lower on the primary language. However, other factors influence these study outcomes. For example, family and community are factors that influence the outcomes of studies on ELLs, and programs should be measured by considering all these factors (Reese et al., 2006). A study to examine the effectiveness of transitional bilingual education programs and the Structure English immersion programs was conducted, and showed that the structured immersion programs were superior to teach second language learners because it used more English for instructional time (Rossell & Baker, 1996, p. 21). Research by Laosa (2000) explained that the transitional bilingual education (TBE), is a program that uses English as a second language instruction, and uses the primary language, but it is designed to just transition LEP students to mainstream classrooms within a short period of time (as cited in Honigsfield, 2009). Moreover, researchers Rolstad, Mahoney, and Glass (2005) found that the developmental bilingual education programs, in which students develop proficiency in the primary language and target language, are superior to the transitional bilingual education programs (as cited in Honigsfield, 2009).

The proponents of bilingual education model emphasize that bilingual education is the best model to teach students with LEP status. Cummins and Swain (1976) suggested with the threshold theory that there must be a level of balanced competence in both languages for children to achieve positive cognitive functioning (as cited in Lenters, 2004). Macswan (2000) argues against the threshold hypothesis, for this theory emphasizes “semilingualism,” and educators might view children as having low language competency in the primary language and the target language. Consequently, educator will have lower academic expectations for these children. Furthermore, McNeil (1988) states that terms such as “semilingualism” or balanced bilingualism tracks children and are use to make social “constructs regarding the status of language and language varieties that mark disenfranchised groups as inadequate or inferior to the dominant class” ( as cited in Macswan, 2000, p. 7).

However, out of the threshold hypothesis, derived from Jim Cummins’ special education bilingual literature (Sparks, Patton, Ganschow, & Humbach, 2009), Cummins (1979) outlined the developmental interdependence hypothesis (C. Baker, 2006). Furthermore, Cummins (1984) made a distinction between Basic Interpersonal Skills (BICS), and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) (as cited in Coleman & Goldenberg, 2009). Cummins (1987) argues that it takes one to two years for second language learners to acquire BICS, and five years of target language exposure to develop CALP (as cited in, Garcia & C. Baker, 2007). On the other hand, SEI programs mainstream students in a shorter amount of time compared to some bilingual programs (Baker, 1998). In a meta-analysis of 17 studies, Rolstad et al., (2005) found that developmental bilingual education programs are superior to the English immersion programs, and that developmental bilingual programs can promote academic achievement for ELL students.

Research has shown that there is a cross-linguistic transfer of skills from primary language to the English language. Furthermore, research indicates that students’ primary language proficiency at elementary level dictates the level of English proficiency and academic achievement in upper grades (Sparks et al., 2009). Cross-linguistic transfer helps transfer knowledge of oral and literacy skills of primary language to the second language, and using the native language does not obstruct the second language development (Tong, Lara-Alecio, Irby, Mathes, & Kwok, 2008). There is a correlation between phonological awareness in Spanish and phonological ability related to the English language (Leafstedt & Gerber, 2005). Bialystok, Luk, & Kwan (2005) have explained that “bilinguals transferred literacy skills across languages only when both languages were written in the same system” (p. 43). Lee and Lemonnier Schallert (1997) study with Korean middle school and high school students, examined the threshold hypothesis, and it revealed that level of L1 proficiency helps in the reading development of L2, so the level of L1 proficiency determines the reading ability of L2. However, in order to transfer these skills to L2 the students must have some knowledge of L2 in order for this cross-linguistic transfer to occur.

Gort (2006) explains that “knowledge gained in one language serves as a foundation and facilitates learning in the second language,” and an example of how bilinguals do this transfer of knowledge from the first language to the second language is by ways of code switching (p. 326). According to Heredia and Altarriba (2001), code switching is mixing and borrowing of words from both languages in order to communicate. A study conducted by Martinez-Roldan and Sayer (2006) found that children use code switching in reading comprehension in order to understand text. Furthermore, Hughes, Shaunessy, Brice, Ratliff, and McHatton (2006) explain that there are different levels of code switching determined by the proficiency of L1 and L2, and bilinguals with high L1 and L2 are able to manipulate both languages, and they are able to apply grammatical and semantic rules.

Although bilingual education reformists complain that, the bilingual education model is not an efficient model for teaching English language learners, Jim Cummins’ threshold theory and the developmental interdependence hypothesis are significant contribution to the field of education. Based on research, the threshold theory and the developmental interdependence hypothesis tell us about how second language learners learn English in a bilingual education classroom setting; however, further research is needed to determine if the primary language proficiency is an important predictor for second language acquisition.

**Statement of the Hypothesis**

**HR1:** Implementing a transitional bilingual Education program with 23 first grade English language learners with high Spanish language proficiency will yield greater reading levels than the group of English language learners with low Spanish language proficiency at PSX in Brooklyn, NY.

**Method**

**Participants**

Twenty-three first grade students in a transitional bilingual classroom from PSX in Brooklyn, NY will be studied for a six-week period. The class is composed of 23 Hispanic English language learners at different levels of primary and second language development.

**Instruments**

* Reading assessment: English and Spanish
* Running Records
* Classroom Observation
* Teacher Interview
* Parents Interview
* Student Interview
* Student Participation
* Artifacts

**Experimental Design**

**Procedure**

**Results**

**Discussion**

**Implications**

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**Appendices:**

**Appendices A**

**Sample Permission Letter for Action Research**

Dear Principal:

I am a student at Brooklyn College. This Spring I am enrolled in EDU 702.22/Seminar in Applied Theory and Research, which is an Action Research course, and one of the requirements for this course is to complete a research project.

My action research project will be about Transitional Bilingual Education Programs. In order for me to conduct this research, I am seeking permission to include student(s) from PSX class X to participate in this study.

During the action research, I will ask students to participate in questionnaires, surveys, and a few informal assessments. I will be documenting my observation and conducting very short conferences/collaborations with the classroom teacher.

I guarantee that all information will be kept confidential and no name will be mentioned in this research; no names of students or school.

Sincerely,

Nury Rodriguez

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I have read the above information and I have decided to allow this researcher to conduct her action research in my school PSX.

Name of Respondent: Date:   
Signature:

Name of Researcher: Nury Rodriguez Date:

**Appendix B**

**Sample letter of consent to parents**

**Consentimiento Para una Indagación Académica en la Sala de Clase Para el use no Lucrativo**

Estimados padres,

Mi nombre es Nury Rodriguez, y soy una estudiante en la universidad de Brooklyn College. Para un proyecto de la universidad yo necesito conducir una indagación acerca de niños que están aprendiendo inglés como segundo idioma en una clase bilingüe. Les pido su consentimiento para conducir este proyecto en la clase de su hijo/hija. Todos los nombres e identidad de los participantes se mantendrán estrictamente confidenciales.

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Nombre de estudiante\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Escuela\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Clase:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Yo\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, consiento por este medio a la participación en

Nombre del padre/del guarda

esta indagación académica. También concedo a, Nury Rodriguez, el derecho de colectar, y utilizar y reutilizar datos de la investigación académica para los propósitos no lucrativos

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Firma del padre/del guarda Fecha

Les agradezco por su soporte y participación en ente proyecto.

Sinceramente,

Ms. Nury Rodriguez

**Appendix C**

**Sample Letter of Consent**

**Consent to Conduct Research with a Student for Non-profit use**

Dear Parents,

My name is Nury Rodriguez and I am currently attending Brooklyn College.One of the requirements for this course is to complete a research project in a classroom setting about English language learners. I am requesting your permission to do this project in your child’s classroom. All participant names and identity will be confidential.

--------------------------------------------------------------------------

Name of Student:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

School: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

I,\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, hereby consent the participation in this project,

(Parent or Guardian’s Name)

and also grant to Nury Rodriguez the right to use the data collected by this research for non-profit purposes.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

(Signature of Parent/Guardian Date

**------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------**

I thank you for your support and participation in this project.

Sincerely,

Nury Rodriguez